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GAINS AND LOSSES OF MODERN BIBLICAL CRITICISM.

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I state the subject in this modified form advisedly. There is a distinction to be made between biblical criticism unmodified, and modern biblical criticism. We cannot conceive of there being anything lost through biblical criticism when by it we mean a devout and prayerful seeking of God's will concerning man in the Bible, and the gracious salvation through Jesus Christ which is its grand purpose to reveal. It is true, when we take biblical criticism in this sense, that "there is everything to hope and nothing to fear from its progress."

But modern biblical criticism cannot be taken exclusively in this sense. It is not bringing a false accusation against it, in view of the destructive criticism of the Tuebingen school, and such wild, irreverent—if that word is too strong then let us say presumptuous study of the Word of God, as shown by Kuenen, Wellhausen, Robertson Smith and others, to say that there are dangers and evils connected with it which make the question whether there is gain or loss to be derived from it; a pertinent one, and one which it is well earnestly to consider.

It probably is too early in the day to hope to get a satisfactory or a just estimate of the gains and losses of modern biblical criticism. We have not yet reached final results in this. Its modern phase is only in its beginning, and there is still much to be done by it; yet it will not be out of place to stop a moment and see where we have arrived, and what ground we have covered. And this article aims not at a final summing up of gains and losses, but will call attention only to a few of these.

I. WHAT GAINS CAN BE MENTIONED?

1. First, the fact that attention is called by it to *a direct study of the Bible*. That is, the destructive attacks upon the Bible by some who claim to be "of the household of faith;" their apparently reckless treatment has directed to the Bible the attention of many who were occupied with discussions of things suggested by it, who were speculating about it, but were not engaged in its direct study.

Now, undoubtedly, greater gain is to be derived from a direct study of the Bible than from the study of speculations about it, or of inferences drawn from it. If we can turn men's attention from a discussion or study of non-essentials in religion, to a direct study of the Bible,

with its "plain fact of a personal Creator, a God in history, a revelation of divine love and duty in his Son," we have gained much; and not the least gain is the fact that when this has been done, "we need not fear the atheism of to-day." There is nothing so refreshing to the thirsty soul, as to go directly to the fountain of truth, and drink deep draughts of divine, loving, inspiring truth. If it is served at second-hand, be it brought in ever such beautiful and attractive cups, it loses its sparkle and its full power to assuage the thirst.

Whatever, therefore, tends to turn men's attention to a direct study of the Bible, is a great gain to true religion. And certainly modern biblical criticism has done this.

2. A second gain is, that through it the Bible has become *a more real book to us*.

It has not always been such to men. They looked upon its history, poetry, song and story, as something which had nothing in common with other history, poetry, song and story. The Bible, is indeed, a *sui generis* book: a book, which, in its application, construction and teaching, has for its object something distinct from any other book on earth; it has its peculiar characteristics. This is true because of its inspiration, and because of the fact that it is "our supreme and sole authority in matters of faith, and 'contains all truth necessary for salvation.'"

That it has so distinct an object, and characteristics of so unique a nature, has led men to look upon it as if it were not a real book—a book which *all* should read, ponder and study. This being the case, it was laid aside for only special use, and was not also used for the good a study of its history, its language, and its literature would do the world. A procedure which is fatal in many respects, since in accordance with it:

(1) The Bible was not man's constant companion, to help him, to cheer him, to instruct him, to encourage him, to warn him.

(2) Much valuable knowledge which the Bible alone contains, besides a knowledge of God and salvation, was kept hid from men's view. Sir Walter Scott said, "There is only one book—the Bible. The other books are mere leaves, fragments." And our own Whittier has well written,

" We search the world for truth ; we call
The good, the pure, the beautiful
From graven stone and written scroll,
From all old-flower-fields of the soul ;
And, weary seekers of the best,
We come back laden from our quest,
To find that all the sages said,
Is in the Book our mothers read."

(3) People dared not approach the Bible with that holy boldness which makes it an arbitrator in all disputes with conscience in the various departments of life, outside of the salvation of the soul.

Now, biblical criticism, and especially biblical criticism of our day, has assisted in making the Bible a real book. And this, Robertson Smith rightly calls its "great value." It is, however, true, that the Higher Criticism goes too far in this direction. It looks upon the Bible too much as it does upon a book of merely human origin, and hence has a tendency to destroy the reverence and holiness with which it should be approached, no matter how real it becomes to them or may be to them. The true course lies between the two extremes, and if the Higher Criticism will have ultimately as its end a following of this middle course, great gain will come from it. This seems to be the hope and promise of it. And, therefore, Professor Green rightly says, "Every encouragement should be given to the freest possible discussion. The attempt to stifle discussion in the present posture of affairs, would be in every way damaging to the truth."

3. A third gain, in brief, is found in the fact that the more the Bible is directly studied the more the divine truth is learned and discovered. Daniel Webster said, "There is more of valuable truth yet to be gleaned from the sacred writings that has thus far escaped the attention of commentators than from all other sources of human knowledge combined."

Biblical criticism which has for its object a direct study of the Bible, helps in discovering, either intentionally, or accidentally, new truths which would never be discovered but for it.

4. Again, in so far as the modern biblical criticism has led to a rejection of the two extreme phases of biblical interpretation—the allegorical and the dogmatic—so as to rest the defence of revelation upon a ground which commends itself to reason and common sense, and upon facts, there is a great gain. The arbitrary fancies and the mystical principles of the allegorists, cannot satisfy this age of critical knowledge of history and language. "The truth of Christ and his spiritual Gospel, which only could give the key to the Old Testament, was indeed a profound one. But instead of studying it in the clear method of history, the Bible was made a sacred anagram; the most natural facts of Jewish worship or chronicle became arbitrary figures of the new dispensation. Type and allegory were the master-key that unlocked all the dark chambers, from the early chapters of the Genesis to the poetry of David or the grand utterances of Isaiah. Wherever we turn to the fathers, to the Epistle of Clement, or the sober Irenæus, to Tertullian, who finds the type of baptism in the Spirit

brooding on the waters and in the passage through the sea; or to Augustine, who explains the six creative days as symbols of the ages, of divine history, we have the numberless cases of this style of exposition. We prize the early Christian writers for their intellectual and spiritual power in the great conflict of the faith with a Pagan wisdom; nay, we can often admire, with Coleridge, the rich, devout fancy glowing through the homilies of Augustine; but as biblical scholars all were simply of a time when true criticism was hardly known.*

Nor will the dogmatic principle of the Latin Church satisfy men of to-day; a principle which found in the Bible, by proof-texts, wrested from their real meaning often, support for any metaphysical or religious dogma which they might hold. Luther called such a procedure "a rover and a chamois-hunter." It was rightly done by Luther when he rejected the *analogia fidei*, and claimed the *analogia Scripturæ sacræ* (Washburn). And in so far as modern biblical criticism has corrected such arbitrary rules, and has taught men "the study of Scriptures in their own meaning" it has led to great gain.

II. WHAT LOSSES CAN BE MENTIONED?

We turn now to a few of the losses of biblical criticism.

I. And there may be named the danger of its causing men to read the Bible with a too critical eye. When they do this, they lose the spirituality of heart and the inspiration to personal piety, which come from reading it in loving trust, and with a devotional heart. There is a great difference in reading the Bible with an eye to find in it literary beauty, or merely history, or reading it in a devotional frame of mind, for growth in spirituality of heart, and personal piety. The purpose for which the Bible was written was not its literary and historical value; on the contrary, it was given to us for our growth in Christian spirit, and as a revelation of God's will to and concerning man, and a revelation of salvation full and complete in Christ. Dr. Washburn has well said, "This word may speak to the mind and heart of a Christian reader, although he knows nothing of the methods of exact learning; and if the keenest criticism do not approach it with special reverence for a book, which has fed the spiritual life of men, as no other has done, it will be barren indeed even for the scholar."

Anything, therefore, which tends to cause men to look upon the Bible in any other than a devout, spiritual frame of mind is baneful. And who doubts that this has been the case, to some extent at least, with the Higher Criticism of our day? Having raised its many doubts—many uncalled for and unfounded doubts, we may add—it has led

* Dr. Washburn in *Princeton Rev.*, July, 1879.

men to take up their Bible with an eye too exclusively critical, and to study the Bible with a mind too full of doubts.

2. This leads us to mention a second evil resulting from our Higher Criticism, viz.: That it has a tendency to cause men to lose their confidence in certain portions of the Bible. This tendency may not be seen or felt so much among specialists in biblical study, or among ministers, who have time and inclination and whose business it is, to study the Bible critically, as among the people in general, who have no time to follow out the discussions, and only know that doubts exist in the minds of men who make biblical study a specialty. Learning that these are unsettled on many points, the natural consequence is that doubts are awakened in their minds and they lose their trust in the Bible. Could the work of biblical criticism go on quietly among specialists, and the rest not know of it, until results definite and satisfactory have been reached, the evil would not be so great. But as the discussions are now carried on, in every religious paper, and even in secular papers, there is no doubt that the result is to unsettle many in the faith of the Bible as the word of God.

Let us devoutly hope and pray that this all-important department of sacred learning, may be directed by the Spirit of God, to the end that the Word of God may not be made void, but may be glorified as a power of good and righteousness in the world.